

**AMENDMENTS TO THE CLAIMS:**

1. (currently amended) Apparatus for facilitating communications between a caller and a called party, the apparatus comprising:

storage for storing a message for the called party provided by the caller, and data concerning a telephone number in association with the message for contacting the caller;

an interface for prompting the caller to provide at least one preference concerning delivery of the message;

a mechanism for causing an establishment of a first connection to deliver the message therethrough to the called party in accordance with the preference;

a device for detecting a signal generated by the called party, which indicates an initiation of a call to the caller; and

a switch interface responsive to the detected signal for retrieving from the storage the data concerning the telephone number stored in association with the message, a second connection to a communication device associated with the telephone number being established based on the retrieved data, the first connection being connected to the second connection.

2. (original) The apparatus of claim 1 wherein the message is recorded by the caller.

3. (original) The apparatus of claim 1 wherein a message identification is assigned to the message for association with the telephone number.

4. (original) The apparatus of claim 1 wherein the telephone number is derived from an automatic number identifier (ANI).

5. (original) The apparatus of claim 1 wherein the telephone number is provided by the caller.

6. (original) The apparatus of claim 1 wherein the signal includes a DTMF signal.

7. (original) The apparatus of claim 1 comprising a voice response unit (VRU).

8. (previously amended) A messaging system comprising:  
storage for storing a message for a called party provided by a caller whose call to a called station associated with the called party was previously unanswered, and data concerning a telephone number in association with the message for contacting the caller;  
an interface for eliciting from the caller at least one preference concerning delivery of the message;  
a mechanism for causing an establishment of a first connection to the called station to deliver therethrough the message in accordance with the preference;  
a device for detecting a predetermined signal from the called station; and  
a switch interface responsive to the detected predetermined signal for retrieving from the storage the data concerning the telephone number stored in association with the message, a second connection to a calling station associated with the stored telephone number being established based on the retrieved data, the first connection being connected to the second connection.

9. (original) The system of claim 8 wherein the preference includes a time range within which the message is delivered.

10. (currently amended) The system of claim 8 wherein the preference includes a number of attempts to deliver the message and the number of attempts is not greater than a predetermined maximum limit.

11. (original) The system of claim 8 wherein the call was unanswered due to a busy condition.

12. (original) The system of claim 8 wherein the call was unanswered due to a ring-no-answer condition.

13. (original) The system of claim 8 wherein the call was unanswered due to a communication problem.

14. (original) The system of claim 8 wherein the telephone number is derived from an ANI.

15. (original) The system of claim 8 wherein the telephone number is provided by the caller.

16. (original) The system of claim 8 wherein the predetermined signal includes a DTMF signal.

17. (currently amended) A communications system accessible by a customer for obtaining information about a desired party, the system comprising:

a server for providing a destination telephone number for contacting the desired party;

a mechanism for causing an establishment of a first connection to a destination station associated with the destination telephone number;

a processor for monitoring signals on the first connection, the customer being prompted to provide a message when a signal from the first connection indicating that the destination station is not answering is detected;

an interface for eliciting from the customer at least one preference concerning delivery of the message ~~prompting the customer to provide a message when a signal from the first connection indicating that the destination station is not answering is detected;~~

storage for storing the message provided by the customer, and data concerning a calling telephone number in association with the message for contacting the customer, a

second connection to the destination station being established to deliver the message therethrough in accordance with the preference;

a device for detecting a predetermined signal from the destination station; and

a switch interface responsive to the detected predetermined signal for retrieving from the storage the data concerning the telephone number stored in association with the message, a third connection to a calling station associated with the calling telephone number being established based on the retrieved data, the second connection being connected to the third connection.

18. (original) The system of claim 17 wherein the monitored signals include a busy signal.

19. (original) The system of claim 17 wherein the monitored signals include a signal indicative of a ring-no-answer condition.

20. (original) The system of claim 17 wherein the monitored signals include a signal indicative of a communication problem.

21. (original) The system of claim 17 further comprising an operator assisting the customer to obtain the information.

22. (original) The system of claim 17 wherein the calling telephone number is derived from an ANI.

23. (currently amended) The system of claim 17 wherein the calling telephone number is provided by the ~~caller~~ customer.

24. (original) The system of claim 17 wherein the predetermined signal includes a DTMF signal.

25. (currently amended) A method for facilitating communications between a caller and a called party, the method comprising:

storing a message for the called party provided by the caller, and data concerning a telephone number in association with the message for contacting the caller;

prompting the caller to provide at least one preference concerning delivery of the message;

causing an establishment of a first connection to deliver the message therethrough to the called party in accordance with the preference;

detecting a signal generated by the called party, which indicates an initiation of a call to the caller;

in response to the detected signal, retrieving from the storage the data concerning the telephone number stored in association with the message, causing an establishment of a second connection to the telephone number based on the retrieved data, and connecting the first connection to the second connection.

26. (original) The method of claim 25 wherein the message is recorded by the caller.

27. (original) The method of claim 25 further comprising assigning a message identification to the message for association with the telephone number.

28. (original) The method of claim 25 wherein the telephone number is derived from an ANI.

29. (original) The method of claim 25 wherein the telephone number is provided by the caller.

30. (original) The method of claim 25 wherein the signal includes a DTMF signal.

31. (previously amended) A method for use in a messaging system, comprising:

storing a message for a called party provided by a caller whose call to a called station associated with the called party was previously unanswered, and data concerning a telephone number in association with the message for contacting the caller;

eliciting from the caller at least one preference concerning delivery of the message;

establishing a first connection to the called station to deliver therethrough the message in accordance with the preference;

detecting a predetermined signal from the called station;

in response to the detected predetermined signal, retrieving from the storage the data concerning the telephone number stored in association with the message, establishing a second connection to a calling station associated with the stored telephone number based on the retrieved data, and connecting the first connection to the second connection.

32. (original) The method of claim 31 wherein the preference includes a time range within which the message is delivered.

33. (currently amended) The method of claim 31 wherein the preference includes a number of attempts to deliver the message and the number of attempts is not greater than a predetermined maximum limit.

34. (original) The method of claim 31 wherein the call was unanswered due to a busy condition.

35. (original) The method of claim 31 wherein the call was unanswered due to a ring-no-answer condition.

36. (original) The method of claim 31 wherein the call was unanswered due to a communication problem.

37. (original) The method of claim 31 wherein the telephone number is derived from an ANI.

38. (original) The method of claim 31 wherein the telephone number is provided by the caller.

39. (original) The method of claim 31 wherein the predetermined signal includes a DTMF signal.

40. (currently amended) A method for use in a communications system accessible by a customer for obtaining information about a desired party, the method comprising:

providing a destination telephone number for contacting the desired party;  
establishing a first connection to a destination station associated with the destination telephone number;

monitoring signals on the first connection;

prompting the customer to provide a message when a signal from the first connection indicating that the destination station is not answering is detected;

eliciting from the customer at least one preference concerning delivery of the message;

storing the message provided by the customer, and data concerning a calling telephone number in association with the message for contacting the customer;

establishing a second connection to the destination station to deliver the message therethrough in accordance with the preference;

detecting a predetermined signal from the destination station;

in response to the detected predetermined signal, retrieving from the storage the data concerning the telephone number stored in association with the message, establishing a third connection to a calling station associated with the calling telephone number based on the retrieved data, and connecting the second connection to the third connection.

41. (original) The method of claim 40 wherein the monitored signals include a busy signal.

42. (original) The method of claim 40 wherein the monitored signals include a signal indicative of a ring-no-answer condition.

43. (original) The method of claim 40 wherein the monitored signals include a signal indicative of a communication problem.

44. (original) The method of claim 40 further comprising assisting the customer to obtain the information using an operator.

45. (original) The method of claim 40 wherein the calling telephone number is derived from an ANI.

46. (currently amended) The method of claim 40 wherein the calling telephone number is provided by the ~~caller~~ customer.

47. (original) The method of claim 40 wherein the predetermined signal includes a DTMF signal.